

“José, can you see?”

LATIN@ RESPONSES TO RACIST DISCOURSE

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“José, can you see?” is the punch line to a bad joke. José, a new immigrant, praises American hospitality because at his very first baseball game, he was sent way up to the best seat in the stadium. Just before the game began everyone stood up, turned to him—perched on the flagpole—and sang out, “José, can you see?” Jokes like this one, along with exaggerated imitations of a Spanish accent, as in, “Es no my yob,” and “My ney José Jiménez”; racist labels such as spic, wetback, greaser, beaner; and public insults like J. Edgar Hoover’s admonition that one need not worry if Mexicans or Puerto Ricans came at you with a gun because they couldn’t shoot straight, but if they had a knife, watch out—are examples of the blatantly racist discourses that construct Latin@s in the United States as stupid, dirty, lazy, sexually loose, amoral, and violent. Linguistic anthropologists, notably Bonnie Urciuoli and Jane Hill, have analyzed the ways in which these forms of speech and evaluations of language succeed in constructing whiteness, with standard English as its voice box, as the unmarked, normal, and natural order in the United States. In her powerful study of language prejudice and Puerto Ricans in New York City, Urciuoli documents how the English of working-class Puerto Ricans and other racialized groups—in schools, workplaces, and all gatekeeping encounters—is intensely monitored for any signs of an accent, nonstandard grammar, pronunciation misfires, or vocabulary gaps. On the other hand, their use of Spanish is censored as out of place, even offensive, in any public domain except those that are clearly marked as “ethnic,” like folklore festivals or restaurants in which Spanish is spoken. The normal bilingual practice of switching from one language to

another is despised in all settings. Monitoring for linguistic signs of disorder may be carried out in the name of improved communication and national unity, but instead it creates levels of tension and insecurity that can effectively silence New York Puerto Ricans and others who are monitored in similar ways.

Jane Hill's work in the Southwest of the United States focuses on particular Anglo American uses of Spanish, which she calls "Mock Spanish." These include the insertion of Spanish words and phrases like *mañana*, *Ah-dee-os*, *macho man*; *Hasta la vista* (with heavy aspiration of the <h>), and the invention of words meant to sound like Spanish, like "el cheap-o" or "correctomundo," the latter spoken by Samuel L. Jackson as pathological murderer in the movie *Pulp Fiction*. The link between Mock Spanish and uncontrolled violence is underscored when movie killing machines such as Schwarzenegger's Terminator alien says "Hasta la vista, baby" before blasting a victim, and when the perpetrator who is trying to get away with seven heads in a bag mocks a Mexican bellhop with "I can't wait uno minuto, I have a plane-o to catch-o." If these usages seem innocuous or innocently humorous to most Americans, some of whom surely would warn us against adopting chilling attitudes of political correctness, Hill points out that the jocular key is deceptive because Latin@s are always the butt of the joke. As she explains, "in order to 'make sense of' Mock Spanish, interlocutors require access to very negative racializing representations of Chicanos and Latinos" (Hill 1999: 683). In my own analysis of the "*chiquita*-fication" process that is central to Hispanophobia because it reduces Hispanics to an undifferentiated and uncomplicated but huge and threatening mass, I cite examples of Mock Spanish, such as "no problemo," as indicators that Spanish is minimized and dismissed as a simple language. The implication is that all you have to do is add an *-a* or an *-o* to an English word and anyone, even alien terminators, can master it with little effort (after all, Latin@s speak it). Hill's main point, building on Urciuoli's work, is that both the monitoring of Latin@ speech and the use of Mock Spanish accomplish "the elevation of whiteness" (Hill 1999: 684) by indexing Latin@s indirectly as inept and disorderly—read "out of control and dangerous"—and therefore in need of linguistic and other controls, ranging from remedial English and Spanish classes to nationwide English-only laws. At the same time, those who monitor Latin@ speech and speak Mock Spanish are directly indexed as "in control" and therefore worthy of being in control of others. Moreover, they come across as knowledgeable and cosmopolitan, people with a good sense of humor, and with the best interests of the United

States at heart. Because they function as the "invisibly normal" (Hill 1999: 683), Anglos are allowed to do and say all kinds of things without appearing overtly racist. They can mispronounce Spanish with impunity, create a simplified grammar, and jumble English and Spanish together indiscriminately, yet all of that remains invisible. My Puerto Rican family would label this a classic example of *la ley del embudo* (the law of the funnel), ascribed to those who reserve *lo ancho* (the wide part) of the funnel for their own unfettered actions but force their lessers to struggle through *lo estrecho*, the narrow neck. In this example of *la ley del embudo*, Latin@s are visibly constrained by rigid norms of linguistic purity, but white linguistic disorder goes unchallenged; in fact, white linguistic disorder is *essential* to a congenial persona, and passes as multicultural "with-it-ness."

Urciuoli and Hill are to be applauded for their insights into the linguistic practices that define and sustain "white public space": "a morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony" (Page and Thomas, cited in Hill 1999: 682). While I concur with their analyses, I have been wrestling with some discomfort, even after I distinguish my sympathy for Anglos who genuinely attempt to communicate with immigrants in their rudimentary Spanish from my disgust with those who bellow "Comprenday, amigo?" I also admit that I find references to "the whole enchilada," the "Frito bandito," and "dropping the chalupa" less offensive than "hot tamales" and "grassy-ass," perhaps because I am not as sensitive as I should be to disparaging Mexican stereotypes.¹ But the root of my uneasiness lies elsewhere. I am most concerned about the fact that given the hegemony of racializing discourses, there seems to be no way out—that is, no way to subvert these racist practices, to escape the stranglehold imposed by white public space. *Me explico*. If we try to resist by not apologizing for—or not trying to change—our accents, or refuse to restrict our use of Spanish, or eliminate the other ways of speaking that the dominant society judges as disorderly, we end up entrenching damaging evaluations of us as dangerous and in need of control. On the other hand, the more we force ourselves to function within the limited linguistic space allotted to us—no accent, no switching, watching our *ps* and *qs*—or thetas (*q*) and *ss*—the more we confirm the notion that linguistic purity and compartmentalization are valid objectives and achievable goals, if only we Latin@s tried hard enough. And, consequently, we distance ourselves from those members of our communities, particularly immigrants, who cannot perform as if a bilingual were two monolinguals stuck at the neck, that is, with one tongue in control of two inviolably separate systems. Is there really no way out?

Certainly, the power of the dominant discourses is oppressive and destructive. After all, we cannot have it both ways—we cannot claim that a wave of Hispanophobia is sweeping the nation, but insist that Latin@s have resisted and emerged unscathed. Ever since the 1970s, when demographers began to predict that Hispanics would become the largest minority group in the nation in the early part of the twenty-first century, policies that restrict legal, educational, health, and employment services have been implemented at local, state, and national levels.² Those policies frustrated immigrant efforts to pull out of poverty, while an elite class amassed unprecedented wealth, based in part on the cheap labor of Latin@s and other immigrants. The resulting economic disparities constitute serious challenges to our democratic ideals of equality and justice, yet they receive much less attention than the English proficiency of immigrants. Between 1972 and 1999, the top 1 percent of the U.S. population increased its income by 119 percent, averaging \$516,000 per person after tax income, while most Latin@s remained among the poorest segments of the 20 percent of the population with the lowest income. This group suffered a 12 percent decrease in its earnings, and in 1999 its members averaged \$8,800 after taxes (*New York Times*, September 5, 1999, p. 16). The backlash against remedies that have attempted to correct these inequities, including quotas, set-asides, affirmative action, and bilingual education, has led to the identification of working-class Latin@ bilingualism with unfair privileges, turning reality on its head. These prejudices are expressed openly or may be thinly disguised, as in the following joke (told to my sister, a teacher in a bilingual education program, by an Anglo teacher): “A Latin@ lifeguard is standing at the edge of the water, watching someone who is drowning. When concerned bathers ask why he isn’t trying to save the victim, the lifeguard says he doesn’t know how to swim. ‘How did you get the job?’ they ask, horrified. His huffy response: ‘I passed the test, I’m bilingual.’” If my sister and other bilingual teachers do not laugh at jokes like these, they are accused of not having a sense of humor, of being too uptight. But if the bilinguals were to suggest that monolingual Anglos are not qualified to teach in a school in which most of the children are Spanish speakers whose parents do not speak English, their Anglo colleagues would not react kindly, and might accuse them of being anti-English, even anti-American. Monolingual English-speaking teachers who fear erosion of their job security have helped place bilingual education at the center of heated national debates. Instead of addressing those fears by underscoring the growing need for teachers of English as well as the advantages of bilingualism for all

American children, teacher unions and educational administrators have abdicated their responsibility by allowing, and in some cases encouraging, anti-bilingual education legislation. In this highly charged climate, research findings that prove bilingual education can work are rarely heard above the din of anti-bilingual jokes and diatribes.³

Immersed in depressing statistics and the sobering realities of contemporary Hispanophobia, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that racializing discourses do not go unchallenged. Missing from well-argued analyses of white public space is the response of the marginalized others, including poor whites, African and Native Americans, non-English-speaking immigrants from increasingly diverse regions of the world, and the distinct reactions of Latin@s from different countries and of different racial, class, and gender backgrounds. My research with Puerto Rican children in New York City's "Barrio" (East Harlem) and with Dominican, Cuban, Colombian, and Puerto Rican adults throughout the city reveals that Latin@s are not passive receivers or observers of racializing discourses. To begin with, they communicate in bilingual and multidialectal ways that resist hegemonic and racist notions of language. The children who were raised on *el bloque* (the block) in El Barrio between 1979 and 1989 acquired several dialects of English and Spanish, principally the New York Puerto Rican English (NYPRE) of the second generation (which is not limited to Puerto Ricans but is the way of speaking of most second-generation working-class Latin@s in the northeast), and the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) of their black friends. Some learned Standard English as foster children in middle-class homes in Long Island, while still others learned working-class Italian American English from the descendants of El Barrio's heyday as a predominantly Italian neighborhood. In Spanish, *el bloque*'s children interacted primarily with working-class people who spoke popular Puerto Rican Spanish, although several residents who had high school diplomas from Puerto Rico also spoke standard Caribbean Spanish. In addition, some *bodegueros* (grocery store owners) spoke popular Dominican Spanish, and in the early 1980s unexpected arrivals from the Mariel boatlift added their *cubanismo*s (Cuban expressions) to the bilingual and multidialectal mix. Since the late 1980s, a growing number of Mexicans from Puebla have been converting many *cuchifrito* (traditional Puerto Rican food) stands into *taquerías* (taco stands), and new Mexican-Puerto Rican mixes in families, foods, and language are underway. Growing up in communities like *el bloque* is not only a bilingual experience, it is also increasingly multidialectal.

Children learned to negotiate the linguistic diversity that surrounded them in keeping with the central Puerto Rican norm of *respeto* (respect), which requires that children defer to their elders. They tried to honor their interlocutors' choice of language by speaking what was spoken to them. Since most were in regular contact with monolingual Spanish and English speakers, they learned to switch rapidly from one language to the other. For example, in one interaction, a bilingual eight-year-old went into the local *bodega* with two other Puerto Rican children, one English-dominant peer and a toddler who was a Spanish monolingual. The bilingual told her friend that she was going to buy chips in English, paid the *bodeguero* in Spanish, asked her friend in English why the toddler was following them, warned the little one in Spanish to go home, and finally told her friend to leave with her in English—all in rapid-fire succession. This ability to switch seamlessly for different interlocutors is extended to in-group talk with other bilinguals, and it becomes their badge of authentic membership in two worlds. The move from switching at sentence boundaries to switching within a sentence draws upon the meanings and values of both languages and cultures for heightened effect, as when a seven-year-old recounted his father's reaction to the new baby's color: "I remember when he was born, *que nació bien prieto* [that he was born real dark], *que* [that] he was real black and my father said *que no era hijo d'el* [that it wasn't his son] because *era tan negro* [he was so black]." Much of the best Latin@ poetry and prose make use of the same inter-sentential switching rules and strategies that this little boy had acquired in his community.⁴

El bloque's children called their language switching "mixing" or "talking both," while Cultural Studies scholars who admire the phenomenon in bilingual songs and literature rhapsodize about "the vanguard of polyglot cultural creativity" (Flores and Yudice 74). But many more people disparage it as "Spanglish," implying a linguistic mongrelization. Sociolinguists have attempted to counter the notion that these bilingual speakers are linguistically and/or cognitively confused by replacing "Spanglish" and its southwestern equivalent, Tex-Mex, with the neutral, albeit anemic, linguistic designation, "code-switching," and by quantifying and explaining the complex grammatical and conversational rules that switchers command (Pfaff, Valdés 1976, 1981; McClure 1977, Huerta 1978, Poplack 1980, Sankoff and Poplack 1981; Woolford 1983, Lipski 1985; Zentella 1981a,b, 1982, 1997; Alvarez 1991). In *Growing Up Bilingual*, I quantified over two thousand switches by *el bloque's* children to prove that they honored the grammar of both languages simultaneously, ad-

hering to the grammatical constraints that Poplack and Lipski found at work in the switching of Puerto Rican and Mexican adults respectively. This approach is aimed at de-stigmatizing switching in the minds of teachers and other gatekeepers, but I fear that the emphasis on proving that “*aquí no pasa nada*” (“nothing’s wrong here”) obscures the power and beauty of mixing various dialects of Spanish and English, and the positive statement it makes about embracing several languages and cultures. More and more young Latin@s are reflecting this positive stance by transforming labels like “Spanglish,” “Nuyorican,” “Chicano,” and “Dominican York” through via the process of semantic inversion, and adopting them with pride.

Ironically, while academic discussions about multiculturalism advocate unity and understanding among different groups, all the while treating them as separate entities, the children of communities like *el bloque* live their lives in the midst of multicultural mixes. Many enter school with more inter-racial, cross-cultural, and multilingual experience than their teachers, but that knowledge goes untapped or is discredited. There is little room in recycled Dick and Jane texts, workbook drudgery, and classrooms that insist on Standard English only, for the multiple ways of what Auer, in an effort to call attention to the creative and contextually dependent construction of a bilingual’s linguistic identities, refers to as “doing being bilingual.” For Latin@s whose networks include speakers of several dialects of both English and Spanish, “doing being a Latin@ bilingual” has multinational and multiracial aspects that are communicated bilingually and multidialectally.

“Doing being a Latin@ bilingual” requires skills reminiscent of an expert basketball player or *salsa* dancer. When the rhythm and rules are acquired at an early age, even new partners share a wealth of moves and can follow each other without missing a linguistic step or dropping the conversational ball. A criticism like “Blanca be actin’ big an’ bad” in the midst of a bilingual conversation calls upon a shared understanding of African American models of tough or cool behavior as well as the grammatical meaning of habitual “be,” just as the insertion of a “*Bendito*” a few seconds later conveys a traditional Puerto Rican lament about whatever is being discussed. Loanwords like *bipéame* (beep me), *janguando* (hanging out), *el rosheo* (the rush/hectic pace), *un breiquecito* (a little break/slack), and *frontear* (to let someone down or act falsely, from AAVE “to front”) reflect the incorporation of new technologies, lifestyles, and hybrid identities in the community’s Spanish. *El bloque*’s bilinguals tap into a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge in defiance of the static

boundaries around identities and languages imposed by monitors of white public space. Moreover, bilingual dexterity is such that it allows them to poke fun at their own semantic and grammatical constraints, to come up with goofy spoofs like *cuellando* (literally “necking”), or to adopt useful creations like *tu emilio* (your e-mail address). Writers and poets often exploit the humorous effects that can be achieved by relaxing the rules of Spanish, English, and their alternation. When Henry Padrón, who identifies himself as a “Rochesterican,” laments the effects of a doubly stigmatized identity in a code switched poem, “*Dos Worlds/Two Mundos*,” he demonstrates mastery of complex constraints, but he also violates several rules on purpose. In the following excerpts, the violations include switching a lone adjective (*mucho*) between a possessive pronoun and a noun (*tu* brain), and between a personal pronoun and verbs (“They *vienen* . . . they *van*):

. . . Trying to understand this system,
mejor dicho cystem,
 [better yet]
 can cause you *mucho* pain.
 [much]
Puede causar un tremendo strain *en tu* brain . . .
 [It can cause a tremendous . . . in your]
 [. . .]
No saben from where they *vienen*
 [They don’t know . . . come]
Y no saben to where they *van*.
 [And they don’t know . . . go]

In my experience, Spanish and English monolinguals are thrown off, or put off, by the rule-governed and rule-breaking switches alike, especially when in written form, but bilinguals always know where to laugh or cry.

Young children seem immune to the comic or dramatic effects of code-switching, because they react with surprise when one of their switches causes comment. Part of their socialization, or learning “how to do being bilingual,” involves the development of a sensitivity to code switching rules and an appreciation of the nuances that are communicated when those rules are broken. In a third grade bilingual classroom, children did not respond to the kind of linguistic creations that elicited loud laughter from sixth graders, for instance, when a single word contained morphemes in both languages, in violation of the bound morpheme constraint, as in “chalk *ita*” (little piece of chalk). The enjoyment of playing with language flourishes

during teen years, when slipping in and out of two languages and several dialects enhances the multiple identities that Latin@ adolescents try on like new outfits for specific settings or situations (Zentella, *Multiple Codes*).

Latin@ bilinguals can run circles around monolinguals with more than just code-switching; they also make use of time-honored bilingual strategies like calquing, when a word in one language takes on the meaning of a word in the other language, especially when the words look and/or sound similar (Weinreich, Otheguy et al). It is not uncommon to hear bilingual students talk about going to study in *la librería* (the bookstore), because *librería* has taken on the meaning of library and replaced the Spanish word for library (*biblioteca*) in their lexicon. Many calques go unnoticed among bilinguals, but some are designed to cause a chuckle or raise eyebrows, for example, when speakers play the English meaning of *embarrassed* against the Spanish word *embarazada* (pregnant). Perhaps the most fun is had with loan translations, which turn word-for-word translations into comic gibberish. A classic example, "Between, between and drink a chair, for the water zero is falling down" is the translation of "Entre, entre y tome una silla porque el aguacero está cayendo" ("Come in, come in, because there's a storm"). My personal favorites are the names of the famous Spanish singers, July Churches and Placid Sunday (Julio Iglesias and Plácido Domingo), and the precautionary statement, "For if the flies" (*Por si las moscas*, or "Just in case").

Latin@s demonstrate familiarity with the lexical and phonological features of varied Spanish-speaking regions that enrich their verbal repertoires in pan-Latin@ ways and that reinforce positive identification with other Spanish speakers. As a result of close contact with Puerto Ricans, speakers from beyond the Caribbean learn, sometimes the hard way, that they cannot jump up and point at an insect on a man's pants, shouting "*Qué bicho feo!*" ("What an ugly insect!"). In the presence of Cubans one is cautioned to ask for *fruta de bomba* instead of *papaya* when ordering that tropical fruit, and with South Americans one must be alert as to where normal uses of *coger* (to take) and *pisar* (to step on/in) are restricted.⁵ Experiences that introduce Latin@s to other dialects' synonyms, especially the taboo terms, form part of the narratives of Latin@ adaptation to life in the United States, and those who form friendships outside of their national origin group end up swapping in-group jokes that rely on regional lexical items and stereotypical pronunciations. Anyone who has had extensive contact with Dominican immigrants from *el Cibao*

hears many references to “hablar con la i” (to talk with an i), the lower-working-class habit (in that region) of replacing post-vocalic /r/ and /l/ with /i/, for example, *carne* > /kaine/, *doctor* > /dok-toi/. Repeated exposure to this practice makes it easy to laugh along with Dominicans when they hear a joke about a *Cibaëño* who was taught to remember how to say his shoe size in English by recalling the word for frying pan: /saiten/= “size ten” < *sarten*. Some dialect jokes are applicable across several national boundaries because the features that are the basis for the wordplay are widespread in the region. In the Caribbean and along the coasts of several Central and South American countries, the aspiration and deletion of syllable-final /s/ is common, as are the hypercorrections that result from attempts to speak “correctly,” as defined by standard bearers from other regions. Because *comerse las eses* (literally eating one’s <s>s) is frequently criticized, self-conscious speakers who are trying to pronounce every <s> may insert one where it doesn’t belong. Some jokes reflect a community’s awareness of the standard vs. local linguistic norms and poke fun at those who try too hard to avoid the local way of speaking. One Puerto Rican joke is about a small town mayor, eager to impress at his inauguration dinner, who responded to a waiter’s query, “*Señor Alcalde, quiere Ud. tabasco?*” (“Mr. Mayor, would you like Tabasco sauce?”) with “No graciaS, no fuSmo” (“No thank you, I do not smoke”).⁶ The emphasis on the end of *gracias* and the intrusive /s/ in *fumo* communicate a pedantic preoccupation with pronunciation, and the folly of it. In fact, aspiration and deletion of syllable final /s/ is frequent and expected, unless one is reading or making a formal presentation. In the Dominican Republic, where final *s* deletion rates are very high across all genders and educational levels, it appears with more frequency in the speech of highly educated females in formal situations, such as reading (Terrell 1983). Consequently, the repeated pronunciation of *s* at the end of syllables or words is popularly ridiculed in two Dominican expressions, *hablar fiSno* (*hablar fino*, with an intrusive *s* in *fino*, literally “to speak fine”) and *comió espaghuettis* (s/he ate spaghetti). Males who speak with lots of final /s/ run the risk of being labeled effeminate. In this case, a regional feature that is criticized by purists, deletion of syllable-final *s*, is maintained because of powerful covert norms in its favor.

But how do Spanglish, calques, loans, loan translations, puns, and dialect jokes constitute responses to the racializing discourse Latin@s are subjected to by guardians of white public space? After all, the linguistic and cultural prowess that they require and the wit that they

reflect are lost on monolingual speakers of English and cannot be expected to dislodge their negative attitudes. I think their power lies elsewhere. Spanglish alternation of several dialects of Spanish and English challenges the notion of bounded languages and identities so successfully that any effort to halt the crossing of linguistic boundaries seems as foolhardy as the proverbial finger in the dike. The collaborative and inclusive spirit of Spanglish wins out, even in the face of self-proclaimed Spanish language priests who strive to protect the purity of Spanish, and English watchdogs who patrol a fenced-in English. In addition, Spanish wordplay that crosses national and regional boundaries reaffirms the homeland's ways of saying things in the very act of sharing them with a wider audience. These practices are part of the linguistic glue that binds Latin@s from distinct communities to each other, fostering a pan-Latin@ consciousness that finds strength in differences as well as similarities.

Other discourses that intensify feelings of *compañerismo* are those that reflect, manage, and resist Anglo dissing of Latin@s more directly. Many are variations on the ways of speaking that we have sampled above, but the specific configurations of anti-racist speech acts deserve to be studied. It would be useful, for example, to distinguish the form and content of the discourses of opposition that predominate in in-group Latin@ settings from those that occur when Latin@s are in the presence of Anglos, and when Latin@s address Anglos directly. When they are alone among themselves, what labels do Latin@s use for those who label them "spics" and "wetbacks"? I have heard many generic insulting descriptors attached to *gringo(s)* and *americano(s)*, for example, *estúpidos*, *hijos de putas*, and *cabrones* ("stupid sons of whores" and "ballbusters" or "cuckolds"), but I know of no study that documents the Spanish epithets that Latin@s in general, or particular groups of them, reserve for U.S. Americans. If there is none beyond "gringo," "americano," "gavacho" (Mexican), "bolillo" (Mexican), or "yanqui" (Caribbean), none of which packs the insulting wallop of "greaser," or "beaner," does it mean that Latin@s are less racist, or more respectful, or that they like and admire U.S. Americans too much to stereotype them with hostile clichés? The latter is unlikely, in view of the venom that can surface when Latin@s discuss their "gringo" teachers, bosses, landlords, and social service workers. Common experiences of being overworked, underpaid, and abused exist, even if unique terms to identify the perpetrators do not.

Counterparts to the racist labels that some U.S. Americans use for Latin@s may be hard to find in Spanish, but it is not difficult to en-

counter Latin@s imitations of English monolinguals speaking Spanish. They are a mirror image of mocking imitations of immigrant English, i.e., they exaggerate the vowels and consonants that give Anglos trouble because they differ or don't exist in English, or mock the incorrect gender endings that are common errors in Anglo Spanish. For Latin@s, "*no problema*," a stock bit of Mock Spanish, is an indictment of Anglo ignorance about the complexities of Spanish grammar.⁷ And just as some English monolinguals make fun of Spanish speakers' difficulties in distinguishing *sheet*, *cheat*, *chit*, and *shit*, some Spanish speakers deride the Anglo inability to produce either the flap or trilled /r/, for instance, *el carro caro* and *pero el perro* ("the expensive car," but "the dog") become "el carRow carRow" and "perRow el perRow." Even young children know that imitating an English speaker's Spanish can communicate feelings of superiority, and get a laugh for being pretentious. An eight-year-old from *el bloque* who wanted to keep a friend from her bag of candy acted like a haughty lady by turning "*Espérate, no toque*" (Wait, don't touch) into "usPEAR-uh-ta, noh touch-a." Reducing the unstressed vowels to "uh" sounds (technically schwas) and rendering all the other vowels as diphthongs, as native English speakers do, successfully communicated arrogant ownership. Evidently, becoming bilingual includes becoming capable of appropriating Anglo pronunciations of Spanish, for comic relief and to exercise control.⁸

Finally, there is some evidence, probably apocryphal, that Latin@s may use Spanish that sounds like English to force a supercilious English monolingual interlocutor to become an unwitting participant in an insult. In one such example, the Latin@ asks an arrogant Anglo something that is meant to sound like a Hispanized version of "Do you speak English?"—"A Ud. le pican las ingles?" ("Do your gonads itch?")—and in another, the question "Are you an American citizen" is rendered as, "Are you a *maricon* [homosexual] citizen?" In both cases, a proud yes answer to both questions makes Latin@s roar with satisfaction at having duped an insufferable gringo.

Latin@s have a good deal of fun at the expense of gringos, and language play is at the heart of their defense against their marginalization, exploitation, and stigmatization. But most of this opposition is expressed in closed Spanish quarters. Anglos may believe that Latin@s are talking about them when Latin@s switch to Spanish in their presence, but usually that is not the case. When working-class Latin@s come face to face with English monolinguals, the imbalance of status and power that is customary in those situations makes conversation on an equal footing impossible. Even the bilinguals—and

more than 80 percent of the nation's Latin@s speak English—find themselves incapable of holding their own or defending themselves adequately in gatekeeping situations in which only they can be the losers, for example, at parent-teacher conferences, in housing and job interviews, and at welfare and social security offices. But some have begun to fight back, even risking their jobs, when the restrictions become unbearable, for example, when they are forbidden to speak Spanish to co-workers by employers who nevertheless exploit their language skills for the benefit of customers. I refer to these cases as examples of "hired for speaking Spanish, fired for speaking Spanish," more than a dozen of which have been challenged in court over the last decade (Zentella 2001). More important, many bilinguals have known for a while—and monolinguals are catching on—that bilinguals are winners at language games that confirm their virtuosity and sophistication. If this kind of self-respect, along with pity for the monolinguals who can't play, were more widespread and admitted more openly, it might have the effect of loosening the gates. Some gate-crashers have an international flavor—that is, the word play requires interpreting Spanish as if it were another language—as in the following examples:

Fujimori's Minister of Housing is Tikito Tukasa ["Te quito tu casa"= I take your house]

Bus in German is *Suben estrujen majen bajen* ["Get on, crush, smash, get off"]

Whether it is used as a comic gloss on international languages or as a proud national flag, Spanish is the voice of home and neighbors in Latin America. In U.S. cities, it is transformed in collaboration with English. The result is both the coat of arms and armor of bilingual Latin@s—every José's defense against bad jokes that take him for a *tonto*. When mocked with, "José, can you see?," he can respond, "Seguro que yes, yo veo bien claro. Y tú?"

NOTES

1. Mexicans may react more negatively to Frito-Lay's "bandito" and the Taco Bell Chihuahua than Puerto Ricans and others (Alicia Pousada, personal communication). I was raised by a proud Mexican father, but I am more offended by the objectification of Latinas as sultry or silly sexpots, e.g., hot tamales, Chiquita Banana, Muriel cigars. An investigation of national-origin and gender distinctions in Latin@ responses

to racialized discourse undoubtedly would uncover significant inter-relationships between ethnic and gender attitudes.

2. An English Language Amendment to the Constitution proposed in 1981 would have eliminated bilingual ballots and other bilingual services. The English-only law passed in California in 1986 led to conflicts about the use of other languages in libraries, hospitals, homeless shelters, and schools. Nevertheless, twenty-three states have passed similar “official English laws” and a federal version passed the House of Representatives in 1996. Similarly, California’s efforts to eliminate health and educational services for undocumented immigrants and to dismantle bilingual education in the late 1990s were duplicated in many other states.
3. Consult the webpages of the National Association for Bilingual Education and the Center for Applied Linguistics for continuous updates on bilingual education policies and research.
4. This child was from a New York Puerto Rican community in the Bronx, not El Barrio. Children in working class Puerto Rican, Mexican, and other Latino communities across the United States acquire similar linguistic abilities.
5. A common term for insect, *bicho*, is the word for the male organ in Puerto Rico, *papaya* is the female organ in Cuba, and *pisar* and *coger* are synonyms for the sexual act in distinct regions of Latin America.
6. Small-town *alcaldes* in Puerto Rico are the frequent butt of jokes because in the past many were better known for their faithfulness to their political party’s line than for their intellectual or administrative abilities.
7. English “no problem” is “*No es ningún problema*” in Spanish. *Problema* is one of the few masculine nouns that ends in *-a*.
8. This has important implications for second- and third-generation speakers who sound like Anglos, and may contribute to their reluctance to try to learn their heritage language.

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